



Sikkim Himalayan Academy (SHA) now exists 5 years. Approximately 80 children get an education of which 47 are boarders.

Everything is free and that is necessary as our children come from the very poorest families. Most of them are orphans or half-orphans. One of the main criteria for poverty is whether or not families own a piece of land to grow their own vegetables.

Often when the children arrive at the school they are so hungry that we have to make them refrain from eating too much in order not to get ill. Also the children from the village eat at school. In the beginning we had asked the parents to provide for lunch but as this did not work for all, we decided to give them lunch as well. Hungry children don't learn well.



Stichting Kinderen van Sikkim
Rekeningnummer: 9227356



Travelling

My intention was to arrive the 19th of April but that day demonstrations block the way up north and I have to spend the night in Siliguri. The issue is about a separate state because West Bengal does not spend allocated government money on what its meant for, they say. And ultimately its about rich and poor, as everywhere in the world.

Rumours are that it will not take longer than 24 hours and indeed I can leave the next day.

Upon arrival at the school I am welcomed by the children and their 'HelloMiss'.

On the way I have practised their names and it makes them happy to be recognised.

There are 3 volunteers, Claudia and Phil, a couple from the US and Sandy from England.

Phil is a retired science professor and Claudia has been teaching young children.

Also Hedwig, one of our founders and permanently living in India, is present.

Because Jamyang, the headmaster, has been busy during the winterbreak and as such had no holidays, Hedwig has offered to take over for a few weeks. Jamyang is free and quite happy to accompany me on my planned visits to the children who have left the school and to Dzongu where 12 sponsored children attend school at Mayel Lyang Academy.



Dr.Grahams School in Kalimpong

From the beginning of this year 4 of our children are at Dr. Grahams. Three had to change school because they finished class 5 and Samyor simply was too bright to let him perish at a government school. Dr.Grahams is considered one of the most prestigious schools in the area and we are extremely happy to have found 4 sponsors willing to pay the yearly fees (around 1500 euros) Everything at the school goes according to strict rules, like an old-fashioned English private school. Jamyang has been appointed as their mentor and caretaker for the time of their studies. The parents have signed an agreement. Every holiday he has to fetch the boys and deliver them in person to their families. They cant leave the premises without permission and even visiting is rather complicated. Although we have announced our visit, it still takes more than an hour to get the handwritten permission of the superintendent.

There are around 1000 students and they all live in different houses with a father and mother. Samyor, Nedup and Chezang are in Calcutta with Mr. and Mrs. Eaton, Ra-Tshering is in Laidlow. According to Mrs. Eaton they behave well and are extremely good in English. Compliments for SHA.



The Tribal School

SHA only goes up to class 6 which means that students after that have to move to another school or go back home to help their parents. As we did not like the idea of 'loosing' all our children after class 5, we offered some to stay at the hostel and from there attend the government school in Buriakop. Right now 4 older girls and Rinchen are still with us – to our great pleasure! They are a big help in the kitchen and look after the youngest children.

The girls look great in their uniform.

Phurkit, Lemit, Nimphuti and Pemkit.

Three of our children have become a monk. Pema and Sonam live at the little monastery in Buriakop and sometimes visit the school. Pumchay lives in a monastery near Gangtok.

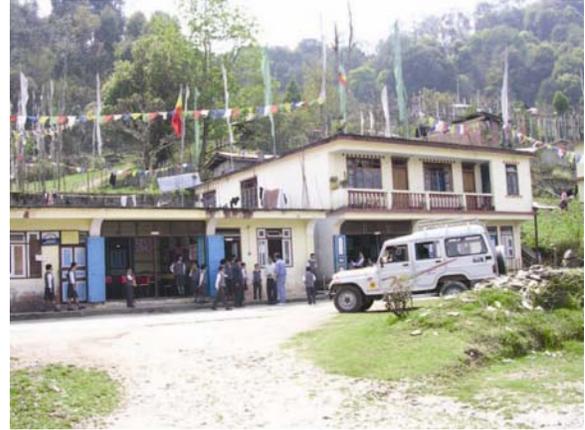
Tempa has been removed from school by his parents and works on the roads, much to our regrets.

Kursongkit and Kunzangkit finally attend the tribal school at Gyangyap, near Tashiding.

Tribal schools are wholly subsidized by the government and also have foreign volunteers.

The school is beautifully located on top of a mountain and has so far only class 6 and 7.

The girls are quite happy to see us, they miss their friends at SHA. How are the teachers? Nice. But not as nice as at SHA. And how is the food? Nice too but Pala's (our cook) was better.



Nedups Family

On our way to the tribal school we hear that Nedup's father went to the hospital in Geyzing. He was suffering from delusions and water in his abdomen. As he could not work and so there was no income he had send his youngest son begging for money in the village. This means serious problems as begging is considered absolutely not done. As the mother died a few years back, the grandmother came to take care of the children. Rumour has it that there is no food in the house.



We decide to pass by. Grandmother is there and indeed, no food. The only income is half the milk of someone else's cow that the children take care of. A very old cow and not much milk. Something has to be done.

There is some extra money from the sponsors of Kunzangkit but as her father just recently got a steady government job we decide to ask them whether we can use part of this money to buy a cow for Nedup's family. We later hear they agree.

And we leave money for a month rice.



Dawa

Dawa is a little bit our pet child. From his birth on he had to live with a stoma – without our western type throw-away bandages. He smelled bad and was avoided by his classmates. Three years ago our society paid for an operation which gave him a regular ‘exit’.

Everything went well. Except for his school results. They were that bad that he risked being send away. My friend Floris who is a surgeon and was involved in the case advised to give him one more chance as it is known that children who recover from handicaps like this need a long time to adjust. I had asked the teachers to consider this in their monthly meeting and they agreed to keep him for one more year, in the hostel (till then he had to walk to school, one hour in the morning and one back in the afternoon)

To everybody’s surprise Dawa has developed into a very responsible, proud boy who takes great care in the little kids and even his school work has improved!



Practical Matters

We lack one sikkimese teacher and in order to fill the vacancy we did put an ad in the main newspaper. Nobody replied. Maybe we asked too much – it had to be a man, from Sikkim, qualified and specialised in science. Sikkim background comes in handy as forthcoming legislation requires 70% of all teachers of sikkimese descent. As all schools face the same problems these teachers are very much in demand. But what then? For the moment we are saved with Mark, a dutch volunteer who will be at SHA during july and august who knows all about science.

We decide to have another ad in September.

Compliment

One afternoon a man arrives at the school and asks for the headmaster. He is from the police.

Jamyang has to report the next day at the district office in Soreng. Often bad news. Did we report correctly on all the volunteers? Is the amount of students ok? Something wrong with our registration? To be prepared for everything Jamyang leaves the next morning with a suitcase full of papers. In the afternoon he returns, all smiles. The inspector was new and just wanted to know what was going on at SHA. No criticism, on the contrary. He thinks what we do is great and should be in the national newspapers, a free private school! That did not exist in Sikkim at all and if we need him: no problem.



Interest

A man arrives at the school, the father of PemDiki. He has stayed the night in the village and leaves again after seeing his daughter and a cup of tea. He has 8 hours of walking ahead, does not have money for a shared jeep but still brought biscuits for the children. He is a porter.

Two days of walking to see his child.



Piece of Land

Since some time we are looking for a piece of land to build a school. The building we have used till now is rented and too small. One of the options is a piece of land in Buriakop, right above the school. Up till now only it was not clear how big it exactly was and also the price is a problem.

Together with Jamyang I meet the land inspector in Soreng. After a lot of misunderstandings – how big exactly is an acre? – it seems we are talking about 40.000 sq. feet so approximately 4.000 sq. meters. If that is the case it will be big enough. Now the price. According to this inspector the government is 17.25 rps per feet plus around 30% market value and that in total will amount to 8 lakh, the asking price (15.000 euro) I think its outrageous but apparently correct. We leave it for the moment as there is also a piece of land for free (we only have to admit a few children in return) but up till now no road is going there.

Still, would save a lot of money.

One week later all of a sudden the land inspector arrives at the school to start negotiations (?)



Surprise, surprise. After a few cups of tea he asks me the price I want to pay for the land. As he came all the way from Soreng in the pouring rain, telling him I first have to consult my fellow trust members in Holland and UK, is not an option. I mention 5 lakh (9.000 euro)

He thinks it not much but proposes to visit the owner. Up the mountain.

The inspector gives an introductory speech, mentions the price offered and the woman says only: No. Not even time for the customary cup of tea.

The next morning the price came down to 7 lakh. I send an email to the trust members to ask their opinion. In the afternoon I finally find time to visit the boys hostel and am appalled, its a kind of cellar, very damp and I realise that during the monsoon it must be even worse.

The land in Buriakop would solve also this problem because we then quickly could start by building a boys hostel. We also need an extra classroom so another problem solved.

I get answers from the trust that I can raise the bid to 5.5 lakh in the hope we will finish at 6 lakh. This succeeds. Still a few months to arrange for the paper works and then we can start building.

Birkha

Two years ago we bought a cow for the mother of Bhawana, one of our students. The mother had been desperate to make ends meet after the death of her husband and she could not feed her 5 children. The person we bought the cow from was Birkha, a paralysed young man who sold his last possession to pay his doctors. He was sitting in a hut on top of a mountain and was completely dependent on his family. Future looked rather bleak as he was given up by most doctors (spinal chord lesion) That's how we stumbled from one sad situation into another.

Birkha seemed intelligent and expressed the wish to finish high school. We offered to arrange books etc for him and now he hopefully will pass his exams next spring.

The problems now are his eyes and also he has heard of a doctor who can achieve miracles with stomach and intestine problems. I offer to get him a jeep and pay the doctor bills.

The only income he has is from the state, 600 rps per month (10 euro) I ask if there is anything he really needs badly apart from that? A warm winter jacket. In the tiny room I only see a hanger with two thin sweaters. Also a small radio to listen to the BBC and practice his English would be good, I think.

Two days later he leaves for the doctors, excited as a child as he had not left Buriakop for 5 years. The eye doctor prescribes glasses and the stomach specialist gives him pills and vitamins. Completely happy.





Cultural Day

Officially the occasion is my birthday but still more it is a day to sing and dance and invite the parents of the Buriakop children and thank the volunteers. There is a real programme and after an introduction by Maree, one of the teachers, Lemit takes over the presentation.

Everybody looks great in tradition costumes, partly borrowed from the Tribal school in Gyangyap, partly made by the teachers from carton and wool. Some hats look terrific! There is singing and dancing and also two comic sketches: Nitesh does well in portraying a police officer and Vivek has to catch a thief in whom we recognize Samten.

Hedwig thanks the teachers for their great job and has a present for everyone. The rest of the day is one big party with somoza's and sweets and milk rice (made by Pala)



Dzongu



Mayel Lyang Academy is the name of the school where 11 children sponsored by our trust go to school and stay in the hostel. Last year we also donated 15.000 euro for a new school building - at least to make a start by building the first floor with 4 classrooms. It looks impressive and we expect it to be finished this autumn.

There are some problems though. Dzongu is torn apart by people pro and contra a plan to build around 20 hydro electrical power plants in the area. Those in favour point out the employment opportunities, the ones against fear an influx of west-Bengali's and destruction of nature.

Loden, the head of the school is against while Mika, our representative and as such responsible for our children, is in favour. Also there is something wrong with the finances. Some of the money has been used for other purposes and although its not huge amounts and probably for good causes, unacceptable. I decide to discharge Mika and ask Loden to take over for the rest of the year. All very sad and annoying but also, given the political controversies, the best solution. Mika promises to take care of the hostel till the end of June and arrange for the money to go back where it belongs. Another slightly awkward situation is that our sponsored children are somehow privileged above the ones that Loden keeps in his house, better clothes and

better food. In the future these 2 groups should be together but this also means that more sponsors are needed. Something to be looked into.

Despite my short visit – due to landslides and lack of jeeps – we still are treated to a cultural performance with songs and dances. Many English songs, probably from Ruth and Gabriele, two volunteers that recently visited the school. The children look happy and healthy.

Also we decide to look for an accountant to take care of the schools administration in order to avoid problems of the past.

